

Plains Baptist Church
Northwest corner of Bond and
Paschal streets
Plains
Sumter County
Georgia

HABS No. GA-2212

HABS
GA,
131-PLAIN,
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PLAINS BAPTIST CHURCH

HABS No. GA-2212

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GA,
131-PLAIN,
14-

Location: Northwest corner of Bond and Paschal streets, Plains, Sumter County, Georgia.

USGS Plains Georgia Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: Zone 16, E 746080 N 3546945.

Present Owner/Occupant: Plains Baptist Church Inc.

Present Use: Baptist church.

Significance: Jimmy Carter was baptized in this carpenter Gothic-style church when he was 9, and remembers it as a focus of his life in Plains. When he and Rosalynn returned to Plains in 1953, he continued to be an active member of the congregation, teaching Sunday School and serving as an ordained deacon.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1906.
2. Original and subsequent owners: The following deeds are for the sale of the parcels of land on which the structure stands. Deeds are from the Clerk's Office, Sumter County Courthouse, Americus, Georgia.

1902 Deed dated April 7, 1902, recorded April 18, 1902, Deed Book EE, page 564, E.C. Stephens to the Lebanon Baptist Church.

Deed dated April 19, 1902, recorded April 21, 1902, Deed Book EE, page 564, E. Timmerman to the Lebanon Baptist Church.

Deed dated May 8, 1902, recorded May 9, 1902, Deed Book EE, pages 584-585, M.D. Walters to the Lebanon Baptist Church.
3. Builder: Local residents say the church was constructed by Augustus C. Wellons, an ordained pastor and part-time builder. Wellons was pastor of the Lebanon Baptist Church (which later became the Plains Baptist Church) from 1892-93. He also built the Wellons Building on Main Street in 1916 (see A.C. Wellons Building report) and several Plains houses in the first decade of the twentieth century. The craftsman-style woodwork in the houses and the church are all very similar.
4. Original plans and construction: None have been located.

5. Alterations and additions: Originally, the building was a clapboard structure in the Latin-cross plan. A two-story education building was attached on the west end in the 1920s and a concrete-block preschool addition was built in the 1950s. Aluminum siding has been installed on the building exterior.
- B. Historical Context: The Plains Baptist Church is a direct descendant of the Baptist Church of Christ established December 1, 1848, with twenty members. The congregation's first house of worship was located 1.5 miles west of Plains at the site of the present Lebanon Cemetery. In 1889 the congregation followed the lead of other residents in the settlements at Lebanon, Magnolia Springs, and the Plain of Dura, and moved to a site near the narrow-gauge railroad track in what is now Plains. The first Baptist church in Plains was located south of the railroad tracks. The congregation purchased the Bond Street property in 1905 and built the present church building in 1906. Much of the congregation's early history was preserved in a document by an unknown author written on stationery (dated 1909) with the Plains Bank letterhead. The church cost \$6,000, which had been paid off by 1909. The church changed its name from the Lebanon Baptist Church to the Plains Baptist Church on June 26, 1909. The document notes the prohibition of dancing and card playing in the building and congratulates G.W. Montgomery, E. Timmerman, and J.B. Clark on the completion of a new rostrum.¹

Since then, the church has been served by twenty-five pastors and for years had the largest congregation of any church in Plains. The Americus Times Recorder reported in 1921 that the church had gained thirty-two members after a particularly successful revival, and the Sunday school had grown so large that a committee was appointed to begin planning an education annex.² Many of the additions and improvements were undertaken as community efforts. Clarence Dodson, a church leader since 1932, recalls the slow progress in the construction of the education annex in the 1920s, as the parish raised the money on their own and did much of the work.³ Jimmy Carter was among the members who enjoyed the fruits of these labors; as a child he attended Sunday school in the annex. He was baptized into the church in 1935 at age 9. Jimmy's wife, Rosalynn, was raised as a Methodist but joined the Baptist congregation and was baptized in 1954.

In the 1960s, the church gained national attention when it underwent a divisive crisis. The events leading up to the split began at the Plains Baptist Church when attempts were being made throughout the south to integrate churches. At the height of statewide civil disturbances, on August 15, 1965, the

¹ "History of the Plains Baptist Church," June 13, 1909.

² Americus Times Recorder, July 15, 1921.

³ Ann and Clarence Dodson, 1989 interview.

congregation voted to refuse to admit "Negroes or any other civil rights agitators." The motion carried fifty-four to six with the five members of the immediate Carter family voting against. Although Hugh Carter states in his book, Cousin Beedie and Cousin Hot, that many blacks attended church in the years following, the issue was brought to a head again in 1976, when a black reverend from Albany, Georgia, asked to join the congregation, insisting that his application for membership be acted on the Sunday before the election. When his admission was refused, the media focused on this small church in the president's hometown. This initial event divided the church, and the events that followed, exacerbated by the media, caused so much bitterness that many members left to form the Maranatha Baptist Church.⁴

More than a decade later, many of the wounds have healed and Plains' two Baptist congregations often gather with other local churches for special services and events. Presently the Plains Baptist Church has about 250 active members and is led by Reverend Donald E. Wilson.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This vernacular frame church has carpenter Gothic details notable in the interior and stained-glass windows.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Two square towers flank the east/front facade of this Latin-cross plan; the larger tower is on the southeast corner, the smaller on the northeast. The front facade has five bays, including the towers, which compose the first and fifth bays. Approximately 55' long, it has 24'-6", three-bay, crossing gables projecting 4' from either side of the nave. The south facade has six bays; the second, third, and fourth in the projecting gable, the sixth in the large tower. The north facade has five bays in the same configuration as the south facade but lacks a bay in the small tower. A small spraddle-roofed hyphen on the west/rear side connects the original structure to a two-story, side-facing, rectangular education building with four bays on each side and eight bays on the west/rear facade. A covered breezeway connects the north side of the juncture of the original and education buildings to a third annex, a one-story, rectangular preschool building located to the north.
2. Foundations: The original block has brick piers infilled with brick. The

⁴ Hugh Carter, Cousin Beedie and Cousin Hot, 1978 pp. 309-326.

education building has a five-course American bond brick foundation over a concrete basement. The third annex is concrete block.

3. Walls: The walls of the church and education annex are clad with white aluminum siding designed to look like the original clapboards. The former features cornerboards and a stringcourse, forming a continuous sill under the windows. The preschool annex has vinyl siding over concrete block.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood frame.
5. Porches, stoops: A wide brick stoop spans the east and south facades of the southeast steeple. A continuous band of eight brick steps curve around the 90-degree angle of the building. The stairs have brick wingwalls with concrete coping and a metal pipe handrail. An east-to-west run of seven brick steps lead to a brick stoop at an entrance in the northeast steeple. This stairway also has a metal pipe rail. A south-to-north run of concrete risers leads to a stoop in front of the northeast door of the education annex. Four concrete steps lead to a small stoop at the south side entrance between the original structure and the annex. A gable-roofed canopy supported on five metal poles connects the original church and classroom annex with the preschool building.
6. Chimneys: A small brick exterior chimney at the west end of the north wall of the church served a furnace in the basement. Another internal chimney in the center of the east slope of the roof of the education annex serves as a flue for the present furnace in the basement.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Three identical doors lead into the sanctuary; two on the south and east sides of the southeast steeple, one on the east side of the northeast steeple. The wood, eight-panel, double doors are set in a pointed-arch frame topped by a transom and pointed arch stained-glass glazing. Single doors on the north and south sides of the connecting hyphen have three panels and two lights. Double one-panel, one-light doors lead to the basement of the education annex in the north and south sides of the east facade.
 - b. Windows and shutters: All glazing in the church proper is stained glass; paired lancets in a pointed-arch opening. Each of the three gable ends features a double window opening flanked by single lancets and a small rose window in the gable. Two additional windows glaze the bays on either side of the gable ends on the north and south facades. All of the windows opening into the

sanctuary are single-hung sash. The fenestration on the two-story annex consists of one-over-one-light, double-hung wood sash with aluminum storm windows; the windows on the second floor extend up to the eaves. All are single with the exception of the windows on the east facade of the annex, second floor, over the roof of the connecting hyphen, which are double.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A spraddle roof covers the cross-gable church and the side-facing gable of the education annex, as well as the hyphen that connects them. A small hipped shed roof covers the basement entrance on the south end of the east wall of the education annex. The preschool annex has a gable roof. All the roofs are clad with asphalt shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The boxed eaves project about 1'-8" and the gable ends have about 2' returns; decorative brackets support the cornices. The education annex has similar cornices and eaves but without brackets. A rain spout runs along the cornice on the west side.
- c. Steeples: Two square steeples terminate each east-facade corner. The northeast steeple is the smaller, measuring 10'-7" square at the base. It has a door on the west side, above which is a beltcourse. The tower has a cornice and a hipped roof topped by a square lantern with louvered vents on all four facades. The lantern is topped by another identical cornice and a square hipped roof that becomes a hexagonal spire.

The larger southeast steeple consists of a bell tower (extending to the height of the top of the lantern of the other steeple), a lantern, and a spire. The tower has doors on the east and south sides and is divided almost in half by the stringcourse above the doorways, which is identical to that on the other tower. The upper part of the tower has Gothic pointed arches on all four sides, containing louvered vents; the bell is inside. Also, like the northeast steeple, this tower is topped by a hipped roof, lantern, another hipped roof, and a steeper hexagonal spire topped by a metal sphere. The steeple cornices are supported by small decorative brackets, similar in nature to those on the building. The roofed sections of the steeples are clad with asphalt shingles identical to the main roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

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- a. Basement: The basement of the education annex consists of a large meeting or dining room with six metal poles supporting the ceiling. A kitchen spans the length of the north wall. Thin panel partitions have been erected in the southwest corner.
 - b. First floor: The church block consists of a large Latin-cross plan with square entrance vestibules on the northeast and southeast corners. At the east end of the sanctuary is a rectangular baptismal font beneath the floor, covered by a trap door. Behind the west wall of the sanctuary is a hyphen containing a narrow corridor that connects the original structure to the annex.

Education annex: A wide hall with a stairwell runs along the east wall. A door on the south wall of the hall leads to a smaller hallway, which leads to a pastor's office in the southeast corner. West of the office is a library, behind which are two small classrooms. Off the main north-to-south hallway are two large classrooms with folding partition walls that allow them to be further divided. On the north wall of the main hall is a door leading to another hall, leading west to a bathroom on the west wall. Three small classrooms are on the north side of this hall.
 - c. Second floor, education annex: This space is basically divided in half: a large recreation room with radiating classrooms encompass the north half. The northeast and northwest corners of the recreation room have canted walls with doors leading to classrooms on the northwest and northeast corners of the building. Doors on the west wall lead to classrooms on the west side of the building. The south half of the second floor is arranged similarly, with a central meeting room and doors that lead to a room on the west wall, two rooms on the south wall of the structure and a long room running along the east wall of the building.
2. Stairways: A wood stairway with nineteen risers runs from south to north along the east wall of the education annex, between the first and second floor. Beneath this stairwell are seventeen wood risers running north to south to the basement.
 3. Flooring: The northeast vestibule has a tongue-and-groove wood floor; the southeast vestibule floor is poured concrete. The floor of the church block is wood covered with red wall-to-wall carpet. The basement of the education annex has a concrete floor, the first floor is linoleum tile, and the third floor is wood with the classrooms carpeted.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Narrow, beaded, tongue-and-groove panels cover

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the walls in the vestibules; it runs vertically beneath the chair rail and horizontally above it. Similar paneling covers the wall area beneath the chair rail in the church. The paneled sections are painted a cream color, the plaster walls above are white. The vestibule ceilings are beaded, tongue-and-groove panels. There is a small round hole in the ceiling of the southeast steeple through which the bell pull hangs. The wood ceiling of the sanctuary has decorative coffering articulated by beaded molding. The basement of the education annex has concrete walls and an acoustical tile ceiling.

5. Doorways and doors: Double five-panel doors lead from each of the vestibules to the sanctuary; each features rectangular stained-glass units above the transoms. On the west wall of the church, two six-panel doors topped by rectangular lights are located on either side of the altar platform and lead to the connecting hyphen. Because a choir platform was added later, the bottom of the south door is cut off. Shorter double, six-panel doors are centered on the west wall behind the altar. The doors in the education annex are six-cross-panel, except for those in the south half of the second floor which are four-panel.
6. Decorative features and trim: A 2'-6"-high chair rail is located around the interior church walls and the two east-end vestibules. Plain wood floor-to-ceiling pilasters are located at each of the six interior corners.
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: A central furnace and air-conditioning system are located in the basement. Individual wall-unit air conditioners are in the office and the pastor's office in the education annex.
 - b. Lighting: Single chandeliers hang in each of the entrance vestibules. The sanctuary has seven hanging chandeliers. The classroom building is illuminated by strip fluorescent lighting on the ceilings.
 - c. Plumbing: The women's bathroom has two sinks and two toilets; the men's room, one sink and one toilet. There is a double-basin sink in the kitchen.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church faces east onto Bond Street on a large corner lot near the edge of the Plains city limits. The area around the church has been covered with small stones, and several large trees shade the parking area.

2. Outbuildings: The congregation also owns the adjacent house on the west side of the church, on Paschal Street, which serves as the pastorium.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original Architectural Drawings: None have been located.
- B. Early Views: A 1918 photograph ("Prosperous Plains, A Thriving Community," The Americus Times Recorder, October 27, 1918) shows the church before the addition of the education annex.
- C. Interviews:

Reverend Don Wilson, current pastor, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, August 2, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

Clarence and Ann Dodson, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, August 2, 1989, Plains, Georgia.
- D. Bibliography:
 1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Clerk's Office, Sumter County Courthouse, Americus, Georgia.

"History of the Plains Baptist Church," June 13, 1909. (this unsigned document is in the possession of Clarence Dodson, Plains, Georgia.
 2. Secondary and published sources:

Carter, Hugh, Cousin Beedie and Cousin Hot, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1978.

Dodson, Clarence, "Plains Baptist Church," A History of Sumter County (edited by Jack Cox)

"Revival Adds 32 to Plains Baptist Church," Americus Times Recorder, July 15, 1921. p. 8.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold
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National Park Service
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ADDENDUM TO
PLAINS BAPTIST CHURCH
Jimmy Carter National Historic Site
Plains Historic District
Bond and Paschal Streets
Plains
Sumter County
Georgia

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